

Working together

At the heart of consensus is a respectful dialogue between equals. It's about everyone working together to meet both the individual's and the group's needs - working *with* each other rather than *for* or *against* each other, something that requires openness and trust.

Consensus is looking for 'win-win' solutions that are acceptable to all - no decision will be made against the will of an individual or a minority. Instead the group adapts to all its members' needs. If everyone agrees to a decision they will all be much more committed to making it happen.

Consensus decision making is based on the idea that people should have full control over their lives and that power should be shared by all, not just concentrated in the hands of a few. It's about having the freedom to decide one's own course in life and the right to play an equal role in creating a common future. This is why it is used widely in groups working towards a more just and equitable society such as small voluntary groups, co-operatives and campaign networks.

Conditions for consensus

- **Common Goal:** Everyone in the group needs to share a clear common goal and be willing to work together towards it. Work out together what your goals are and how you will get there. If differences arise later, revisit the common goal to help to focus and unite the group.
- **Commitment to reaching consensus:** Everyone needs to be willing to really give it a go. This means being deeply honest about what it is you want or don't want, and properly listening to what others have to say. Everyone must be willing to shift their positions, to be open to alternative solutions and be able to reassess their needs.
- **Trust and openness:** We need to be able to trust that everyone shares our commitment to consensus and that everyone respects our opinions and equal rights. It would be a big breach of trust for people to manipulate the process of the meeting in order to get the decision they most want.
- Part of this is to openly express both our desires (what we'd *like* to see happening), and our needs (what we *have* to see happen in order to be able to support a decision). If everyone is able to talk openly then the group will have the information it requires to take everyone's positions into account and to come up with a solution that everyone can support.
- **Sufficient time** for making decisions and for learning to work by consensus. Taking time to make a good decision now can save wasting time revisiting a bad one later.
- **Clear Process:** It's essential to have a clear process for making decisions and to make sure that everyone has a shared understanding of how it works.
- **Active participation:** In consensus we all need to actively participate. We need to listen to what everyone has to say, voice our thoughts and feelings about the matter and pro-actively look for solutions that include everyone.

Agreement and Disagreement

At the decision stage people have several options:

Agreement with the proposal.

Reservations: You are willing to let the proposal go ahead but want to make the group aware you aren't happy with it. You may even put energy into implementing it once your concerns have been acknowledged.

Standing aside: You want to object, but not block the proposal. This means you won't help to implement the decision, but you are willing for the group to go ahead with it. You might stand aside because you disagree with the proposal, or you might like the decision but be unable to support it because you don't have the time or energy.

The group may be happy to accept the stand aside and go ahead, or they may work on a new proposal, especially if there are several stand asides.

A block always stops a proposal from going ahead. It expresses a fundamental objection. It isn't "I don't really like it," or "I liked the other idea better." It means that you cannot live with the proposal. The group can either start work on a new proposal, or look for amendments to overcome the objection.

In an ideal consensus process a block wouldn't happen since any major concerns about a proposal should be addressed before the decision stage. However, sometimes people aren't able to express their concerns clearly enough, or aren't heard by the group. In such situations the block acts as a safeguard to ensure that decisions are supported by everyone.

Being able to block is an integral part of consensus, but it comes with a big responsibility. A block stops other people from doing something that they would like to do, and it should therefore only be used if serious concerns are unresolved.

Make sure everyone understands the different options for expressing disagreement. Often people are confused and block when they'd actually be happy to stand aside. Sometimes people are scared of blocking, even if they are deeply unhappy and use a milder form of disagreement instead.

Guidelines for reaching consensus

- If you don't understand something, don't be afraid to say so.
- Be willing to work towards the solution that's best for everyone, not just what's best for you. Be flexible and willing to give something up to reach an agreement.
- Help to create a respectful and trusting atmosphere. Nobody should be afraid to express their ideas and opinions. Remember that we all have different values, backgrounds and behaviour and we get upset by different things.
- Explain your own position clearly. Be open and honest about the reasons for your view points. Express your concerns early on in the process so that they can be taken into account in any proposals.
- Listen actively to what people are trying to say. Make an effort to understand someone's position and their underlying needs, concerns and emotions. Give everyone space to finish and take time to consider their point of view.
- Think before you speak, listen before you object. Listen to other members' reactions and consider them carefully before pressing your point. Self restraint is essential in consensus - sometimes the biggest obstacle to progress is an individual's attachment to one idea. If another proposal is good, don't complicate matters by opposing it just because it isn't your favourite idea! Ask yourself: "Does this idea work for the group, even if I don't like it the best?" or "Does it matter which one we choose?"

- Don't be afraid of disagreement. Consensus isn't about us all thinking the same thing. Differences of opinion are natural and to be expected. Disagreements can help a group's decision, because with a wide range of information and opinions, there is a greater chance the group will find good solutions. Easily reached consensus may cover up the fact that some people don't feel safe or confident enough to express their disagreements.

Key skills for consensus

Active Listening: When we actively listen we suspend our own thought processes and give the speaker our full attention. We make a deliberate effort to understand someone's position and their needs, concerns and emotions.

Summarising: A succinct and accurate summary of what's been said so far can really help a group move towards a decision. Outline the emerging common ground as well as the unresolved differences: "It seems like we've almost reached agreement on that bit of the proposal, but we need to explore this part further to address everyone's concerns." Check with everyone that you've got it right.

Synthesis: Find the common ground and any connections between seemingly competing ideas and weave them together to form proposals. Focus on solutions that address the fundamental needs and key concerns that people within the group have.